Why Tarbolton?

By: Michael Wallace

Over the years, several of the members of the Masonic Lodge in Fairbury, Illinois, have pondered why their Lodge is called Tarbolton. Why not Fairbury Masonic Lodge? Why would the founders of Tarbolton Lodge No. 351 have named it instead of naming it after the town it is in like so many other Masonic Lodges are named? We have speculated that it is named after a town in Scotland but were never sure. Now, thanks to a newspaper article from 1911, we finally have our answer.

According to an archived copy of our local newspaper, The Fairbury Blade, two of our founding members are responsible for our distinctive name. Henry Remington and L.H. Nash helped to start Tarbolton Lodge in 1860 and were huge fans of the poet, Robert Burns. To honor their favorite bard, the two Brothers proposed the Lodge be named "Tarbolton" and that moniker was adopted in the final vote to charter the new Lodge in Fairbury. But who is Robert Burns and what does he have to do with Tarbolton?

Born in Alloway, Scotland on January 25, 1759, Robert Burns was the oldest of seven children. His parents, William, and Agnes were tenant farmers and Burns grew up extremely poor. William was a smart man and made sure that his son was educated. Much of Robert's education came directly from his parents but he was also sent away for a few months at a time to study with a local scholar. Burns showed an extraordinary talent for poetry from a youthful age. Despite limited formal education, his passion for literature drove him to author captivating poems and songs. In 1786, he published his first collection, known as the Kilmarnock volume, which marked the beginning of his literary success." Burns is now widely regarded as the national poet of Scotland and is credited with a favorite New Year's Eve tradition:"Auld Lang Syne."

But we still have not learned why two nineteenth century Freemasons wanted to name their Lodge "Tarbolton" to honor Burns. In 1777, William Burns moved his family to Tarbolton, Scotland in search of work.

The family quickly integrated into the community and settled. In 1780, Robert and his brother, Gilbert, founded the Tarbolton Bachelors club. It was here that he learned to dance, become a Freemason, and create a men-only debating society. On July 4, 1781, Robert Burns was

initiated into St. David Tarbolton Lodge No. 174 and began his Masonic journey. He would later join St. James Tarbolton Lodge and become their Deputy from July 1784-1788.

Freemasonry left a profound impact on Burns' literary works. The principles of brotherhood, morality, and social justice that he encountered as a Freemason are evident throughout his poetry and songs. For example,"A Man's a Man for A'That" Robert Burns describes the true worth of man and how it is not defined by wealth, position, or possessions. If you remember any of your First-Degree lectures, the concept of not being judged by your"worldly wealth or honors" should sound familiar. In his poem "The Master's Apron" Burns describes the symbolic significance of the Master's apron, which is a central element in Masonic regalia. It symbolizes innocence, honor, virtue, and the pursuit of knowledge, reflecting Masonic values. The Bard of Scotland authored several other poems and songs with Masonic influences including "The Masonic Song" and "Farewell to the Brethren of St. James Lodge, Tarbolton."

Although Robert Burns was never a member of a Lodge specifically named "Tarbolton"the members of Tarbolton Lodge No. 351 are grateful to Brothers Remington and Nash for proposing and advocating our distinctive name. Tarbolton is proud of our Scottish heritage. Now, who is ready for a Burns Supper complete with kilts, knives, Scottish whisky, poems, bagpipes, and HAGGIS?

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